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Claremont Mckenna College

**Gentrification as an Institution of Injustice: Understanding the Displacement of
Low-Income Families and Erasure of Culture**

submitted to

Professor Frederick Lynch

by:

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Bachelor of Arts

Government and Media Studies

for

Senior Thesis

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Abstract:

In the last decade, gentrification has become a world-wide strategy for capital accumulation, but is one that disproportionately prioritizes corporate interests over community interests. Although often disguised as a form of urban revitalization, gentrification economic renewals lead to higher rent prices that consequently pushes poor communities out of their home and makes urban spaces geared towards affluent middle-class families only. Gentrification is not a natural phenomenon, but is instead a man-made project that is rooted in capitalism and neoliberal understanding of the market economy. This paper explores the roots of creating profit by means of privatization, especially when discussing housing. It also discusses the state's role in contributing to the displacement that is often associated with urban development initiatives. Lastly, this paper will also assess the extent to which gentrification wipes out a community's history and culture, and provides a critical understanding of gentrification as a process of social exclusion.

Keywords: Gentrification, Urban Development, Urban Cleansing, Displacement, Eviction Rates, Poverty Profit, Artwashing, Modern Capitalism, Neoliberal Ideology

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I am extremely grateful for Professor Lynch, my thesis advisor, who gave invaluable advice, continuous support, and patience through my senior project. With your guidance, I learned how concise my thoughts into a successful analysis on the impact gentrification has on several low-income communities like mines.

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Introduction: Roots of Gentrification

Every neighborhood has some history of change — populations change, economies change, demographics change, and cultures change. When the change starts to change the whole neighborhood as you know it, in a way that does not directly benefit those who have lived in a given area for years, but rather those who have been encouraged to move into that neighborhood, one begins to question the purpose of the changes being caused by such a redevelopment process. From New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other major cities, everyone is talking about gentrification — a term that is often described as urban renewal, revitalization, or regeneration. Although everyone defines it differently, gentrification is far more complicated than mere neighborhood development.

Gentrification is defined as the process by which a historically disinvested neighborhood gets renovated by means of a real estate investment and an influx of more affluent residents moving in. The process by which socially working-class areas in busy cities became avenues for middle-class residential uses, first became popular in the 1960s after private-market investment capital moved into inner districts of major urban centers. Gentrification was first seen as a form of architectural restoration that preserved the Victorian-style aesthetic. But as time passed, left-leaning urban socialists began studying the correlation this change in urban culture had with the economic restructuring of the communities getting invested in. A gentrifier's taste became less about preserving a specific architecture style and more about the affordability of old buildings. Throughout Northern America and Eastern Europe, we begin to see a trend in the deterioration of public subsidized housing located near central business districts — a process that

was fostered by private markets. A significant portion of it was led by “sweat-equity” part-time workers who usually worked white collar jobs.¹ When we discuss sweat-equity, we are referring to unpaid labor employees or wealthy entrepreneurs who do maintenance on their own because they have the time to do so, instead of paying traditional laborers. Sweat equity, also known as “do-it-yourself”, can increase the value of a home or building based on the contribution of the value one choose to “invest” into a renovation without putting in money investments. Rather than spending capital to pay someone to do the renovations or upgrades, you’re doing the work yourself. Sweat equity becomes a great tool in real estate if you happen to possess the skills you need to perform DIY construction work, such as landscaping, plumbing, or any other area that can help renovate a property. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, these do-it-yourself workers along with the rise of service-sector employment gave way to the rise to the concentration of professional and technical jobs as the new urban core.

A property’s market value is determined by a variety of factors – from its location to its size, amenities and much more. But most importantly, is heavily impacted by the state’s ability to define the economic and social value of urban areas. Between 1970 and 1975, a period during which inflation rates and fuel costs were high, governmental policies made rehabilitation in the inner city an “economically viable alternative for both homeowners and real estate developers”.² Rather than investing in the complete demolition of old buildings, these government policies gave grant incentives for housing improvements. This new change was much cheaper than the previous procedure of renovation.

¹ Zukin, Sharon. "Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core." *Annual Review of Sociology* 13 (1987): 129-47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083243>.

² Ibid.

With the high inflation rates of the 1970s, the decrease in the economic value of property in the inner city areas made it economically affordable for gentrifiers interested in being involved in the housing renovation process. Inner-city neighborhoods can also become attractive spaces for unemployed people who work in creative and performing industries who would prefer having closer access to information and markets in their field. Whether gentrification serves as an investment for capital gain or investment in social integration, it encourages further corporate expansion in various inner cities across the country.

Neil Smith, a professor in geography at Rutgers University, views gentrification as the process of spatial expansion through which settlements in urban frontiers become popular.³ Because corporate investments are driven by capital expansion, gentrifiers seek urban spaces as a form of new territory to claim. Any “uncivilized” or poor land is up for grabs.

Gentrification is a powerful force that will either strengthen or break a community. When gentrification occurs, the value of properties in areas that have suffered from prolonged disinvestment, will increase, consequently resulting in the rise of rent prices, home values, and property taxes. As the rising costs can reduce the supply of affordable housing, more of a neighborhood’s long-term residents get “priced out” — the process by which an individual is unable to benefit from the economic growth that comes with the increased investments because they can no longer afford the luxuries and commodities produced by them.⁴ Gentrification investments often transform old warehouses and factories into prosperous bars, restaurants, and

³ Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London: Routledge, 2005. http://rohcavamaintenant.free.fr/USB%20KEY%20Fahriye/kıtap%20Neil%20Smith__The_New_Urban_Frontier_Gentrification_and_the_Revanchist_City.pdf.

⁴ Miller, Lindsay. n.d. “We Need to Change How We Think About Gentrification.” National Civil League. <https://ncrc.org/gentrification/>.

improved spaces that produce commodities whose price of purchase and consumptions extends far beyond what the long-term, low-income residents are able to afford.

NPR podcast *Gentrification: Progress or Destruction*, outlines the undergoing economic change of urban areas through the lens of three people who lived through the process of redevelopment from a different community⁵ Jacy Webster, the owner of a Philadelphia Record Exchange, recalls buying a cheap home in South Philly in early 1991 as a struggling musician, and later having to pay property taxes he did not originally account for, after a large group of wealthier families began moving in throughout 2011. Webster initially thought the new change in the city was good because new business began to open. Quickly enough, the property values skyrocketed, increasing taxes beyond his budget. Webster's home that was once worth \$45,000, was now worth more than \$280,000. During the podcast, Webster was clear to point out that he was a white man being affected by the raise in property taxes, hinting that gentrification is not always a war on race, but rather a war on the poor.⁶

Gentrification remains a complicated and controversial topic, that nevertheless, involves the movement of people. Debates about gentrification often fall into two main categories: You either believe it is good or you believe it is bad. Those that believe gentrification is a *good* thing, argue it revitalizes a previously rundown neighborhood and attracts affluent citizens to help boost its economy. Those opposing gentrification will often center the conversation on the displacement of long-time low-income residents who can no longer afford the wealthy lifestyle that gets introduced after the new affluent residents move in. I believe in the latter.

⁵ *Gentrification: Progress or Destruction*. (2014, March 13). NPR. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2014/03/13/289798823/gentrification-progress-or-destruction>

⁶ Ibid.

Gentrification is not a natural phenomenon, but rather a man-made process that disrupts family ties and could erase the cultural heritage of working class communities by encouraging hipster aesthetics to take over. When an overwhelming majority of those migrating into gentrifying neighborhoods tend to be white professionals, poor communities of color living in these areas are put at a huge disadvantage. Gentrification occurs in working class communities that typically house people of color, especially Black people.

It is a replacement of the poor, for profit — an urban cleansing. It is a class war that pushes poor communities out of their home to make space for middle-class families. Gentrification holds a strong tie between private property, class, and the market. When gentrification occurs, it is a victory for private property and a loss for those without property. Under gentrification, previously underdeveloped cities don't "bounce back" from poverty but simply move it elsewhere. It is a myth that gentrification trickles down to help everyone — investors are the true beneficiaries of most urban development projects, usually to the detriment of low-income residents living in the areas being "developed".

The decisions that politicians, business leaders, and developers take together, will continue to deeply impact the lives of poor families across the country. When we begin to commodify housing, the conversation about reviving a community turns housing from something that provides shelter and protection, into something that is bought and sold to make money. A housing crisis continues to be prevalent in U.S. culture. Stakeholders may facilitate gentrification in the name of the public good, but the benefits are highly privatized and highly exclusive. It is

time we do more for the communities we are claiming to uplift through gentrification. As long as the private housing market dominates the sphere of urban development projects, low-income families will continue to be at a disadvantage.

1 Understanding Capitalism and the Role of the State

Gentrification occurs as a result of capitalism, a system that is heavily characterized by the relentless pursuit of profit. In order to understand the roots of gentrification, we must first delve into the political forces supporting such a movement. Capitalist ideology holds the notion that open markets are the most suitable for economic and social progress, and that leaving the choice to the consumer is the fairest form of public will. Capitalism is often described as a business world in a post industrial society. In *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism*, historian of economic thought Robert Heilbroner, examines the day-to-day activities of business and the market ingrained in the industry to better understand capitalism and the roots it was founded on. He argues that capitalism at the most basic level, is based on “the driving need to extract wealth from the productive activities of society in the form of capital”.⁷ Here, the productive activities of societies like housing or education, give rise to surplus that is then used to generate more surplus. As Heilbroner stresses however, in a capitalist society, the wealth resulting from a surplus is not limited, but rather treated as a means to accumulate more wealth.

In essence, capital accumulation will never have an end but instead be used as means for its own expansion. Under a capitalist state, anything can become commodified, as long as it can be sold in exchange for money, which can later be reinvested to produce even more commodities and more money. Under gentrification, land and housing becomes the commodity, and the transplants become the owners of capital. Most of what we are used to seeing in urban development plans, is rooted on the structure of a capitalist mode of production: economically

⁷ Heilbroner, R. L. Essay. In *The Nature And Logic Of Capitalism*, 34–35. W.W. Norton & Company, 1985.

empowering a selected few to oversee an operation that while it improves their own financial gain and political power, it disempowers others.

For capitalists, morality is out of the equation when it comes down to money making. It is under capitalism, that markets will favor the interests of business rather than individual people. You see, when dealing with gentrification, residents are rendered into units of exchange. People are no longer viewed as people, but as a walking dollar sign that can be “exchanged” for money in an open market that disproportionately disadvantages them. In *The Market as Prison*, economic Yale professor Lindbolm, deeply examines the incentives and temptations policymakers have in protecting business interests. Despite the market system being the main mechanism different societies use to create and foster wealth, Lindbolm argues it is not efficient in distributing social or economic justice and instead only protects the interests of capital owners — those at the top 10%.⁸ He also reveals the dominant role the state plays in helping maintain a profit-based market economy through policies that favor the interest of private corporations over that of the working class. Markets rob democratic governments of progressive changes because (1) governments cannot govern without the support and consent of business because businesses are those with the money to fund ambitious projects, and (2) businesses can not operate efficiently without the cooperation and legitimization from the government that allows them to grow (through policies that don’t act as a barrier to their capital gain).

Local governments’ attempt in advancing gentrification as a solution for urban decay triumphed in the 1990s after the global success of neoliberal entrepreneurialism. Under neoliberalism, the destruction of state provision of welfare is encouraged, while working to

⁸ Lindblom, Charles E. "The Market as Prison." *The Journal of Politics* 44, no. 2 (1982): 324-36. doi:10.2307/2130588.

implement new state policies that promote capital mobility. Neoliberal ideology claim that markets that are “open, competitive, unregulated, [and] liberated from state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development”⁹ when in reality, it doesn’t. Neoliberalism consists of economic practices that suggest human well-being is best advanced through one’s entrepreneurial freedoms and liberties within a framework that encourages private-property rights and a free market.¹⁰ Ultimately, it enforces the concept of individualism --- the notion that one’s economic status is based solely on one's willingness to “work hard” rather than on the various political and economical changes that have become prevalent in one’s community. What this perspective on gentrification of gentrification fails to recognize is that, is that not everyone starts on the same playing level field. Those with land possession automatically advantaged over those renting a complex someone else owns.

The New Age of Colonization

In several conversations about gentrification, it is common to hear the argument that gentrification is “inevitable” and part of a changeable world that “can not be stopped”. The idea that gentrification can not be stopped is deeply frustrating — especially when the statement comes from the old-belief that people have the right to own land even if it's at the expense of other human life. Is it possible that gentrification mirrors colonization?

Gentrification comes with entitlement. It convinces real estate developers and city planners that they have a right to better themselves through any means necessary. Gentrification is a product of society’s continuing interest in advancing the belief that one group is more

⁹ Brenner, N., Peck, J. and Theodore, N. (2012) Towards deep neoliberalization?, in Kunkel, J. and Mayer, M. (Eds) *Neoliberal Urbanism and Its Contestations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

¹⁰ Roy, Ravi K., Arthur Denzau, and Thomas D. Willett. *Neoliberalism: National and Regional Experiments with Global Ideas*. London: Routledge, 2007.

deserving and worthy of capitalistic consumption with little regard to social consciousness.¹¹ It also demonstrates mankind's continual obsession with conquering and capitalizing over others for their own gain.

You see, a neoliberal approach to understanding urban development would argue that gentrification has been incorporated into public policy as a mechanism for urban renaissance. However, similar to colonization, gentrification brings benefit only to a selected few. As an economy blooms, some residents are left behind in the dark. The production of urban spaces evolves into something that is intended for more affluent users. In the process of gentrification, the moral consideration of protecting the interests of long-term residents becomes secondary. Rapid displacements of low-income renters occur in the name of commercial space, and financial outputs become the main goal of the process. Under gentrification, the main beneficiaries of this commercialization become realtors, public officials designing policies that protect realtors, financial bankers, and developers themselves.

How to Kill a City reveals the different impact that the choices a city and its government make, has on residents from different income brackets. By determining when and how to fund affordable housing, distinguishing which local business to support, the process that is often disguised as "revitalization" really is something much more daunting. In his analysis of these social relationships, Moskowitz links four different cities: post-Katrina New Orleans, post-bankrupt Detroit, post-tech boom in San Francisco, and post-1980 bankrupt New York.¹² In

¹¹ Wharton, Jonathan L. "Gentrification: the new colonialism in the modern era." *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table* (2008). *Gale Academic OneFile*.

¹² Moskowitz, Peter. *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood*. New York: Nation Books, 2018.

his examination of these cities, he points out that each is “post-something” and pushed into gentrification by a detrimental event or set of state policies. Although cases of gentrification are often criticized individually, Moskowitz argues they are all interconnected in some way, and are representative of different economic systems in place. He also argues it is difficult to fight gentrification when at its core, is rooted in an American interest in generating capital for the rich.

The real estate industry is always looking for new markets in which it can revitalize its profit rate. Fifty years ago that place was suburbs. Today it's cities. But that's only half the explanation for gentrification...This is capitalism's constant urban conundrum: what makes cities profitable is inherently at odds with the needs of the poor and middle classes (who are needed for a city to function), and centrally located land has inherent value if it can be made amenable to the rich. Gentrification may be a new expression of this conflict between land value and the needs of the poor, but it's a problem as old as capitalism itself.¹³

For Moskowitz, cities become extremely vulnerable to gentrification when an incident or set of policies put them in a state of poverty. Although one can assume that natural disasters like Katrina would push governments to give more housing aid to help those who were left without a home, they're more inclined to replace abandoned buildings with luxury apartments as a way to generate revenue that would aid the city in getting back into the economy. After thousands of residents from New Orleans, most of which were African American, fled after Hurricane Katrina and didn't come back, New Orleans became a space in which businesses serving a bourgeois clientele drastically opened up.

¹³ Ibid

Prior to Katrina, various developers had already begun plans to revitalize various properties that were owned by Iberville, a neighborhood in the city of New Orleans that was one of the last New Deal-era public housing remaining in the city. In 2001, Tom Benson, the owner of the New Orleans Saints, wanted to take down the housing project and use the space to fund a new football stadium. Then in 2004, developer Pres Kabacoff and chief executive of Historic Restorations Incorporated, proposed a *Operation Rebirth*, which would “reinvigorating the city’s tourist economy and urban core” by building a multimillion-dollar music museum at the center of the city that would bring tourists to enjoy an “Afro-Caribbean Paris”.¹⁴ Of course, this would mean Iberville and its residents would be pushed elsewhere. Kabacoff’s proposal got delayed because Iberville residents knew a museum would permanently replace every person living there. Like several developers, Kabacoof believed that building mixed-use complexes would help bring more “life” to a poor, previously disinvested neighborhood. So once Katrina happened, urban development plans easily swapped their way in. If you are searching for a neighborhood to gentrify, you simply find a place where buildings can be bought for cheap and made more expensive.

Moskowitz blames capital, particularly the endless quest for profit, as one of the main contributors of gentrification. As he recognizes, when people develop strong desires to pursue capital, they will do whatever they can to get it, even if it means hurting others in the process. By pushing long-term natives from their homes and claiming the land as one’s own, gentrification becomes the newest modern form of colonization.

¹⁴ “Poverty Is the New Prostitution: Race, Poverty, and Public Housing in Post-Katrina New Orleans.” “Poverty Is the New Prostitution: Race, Poverty, and Public Housing in Post-Katrina New Orleans,” by Alecia P. Long, *Journal of American History*, n.d.
http://archive.oah.org/special-issues/katrina/Long1e01.html?link_id=cam_poverty.

2 Ticking Time Bomb: Schedule for Displacement

The probability of long-term residents getting priced out from their own communities, is quite high when more affluent populations move in and bring their expensive interests along with them. In the midst of a “booming” metropolitan city, landlords operating in neighborhoods undergoing gentrification become incentivized to open up rental units to those who could afford paying higher rents.¹⁵ With landlords increasing rent prices in order to meet the new market rate and demand brought upon by gentrification, poor families, local pop shops, and community organization — especially those belonging to people of color — become disproportionately disadvantaged as the inflationary rent results in their involuntary displacement. Between 2009 and 2015, one-fourth of the low-income senior residents were forced to leave their home in Detroit, Michigan, after their Section 8-based Housing faced closure and was replaced by luxury apartments.¹⁶ During that period of redevelopment, over 232,000 evictions around that same area were recorded.¹⁷ It is difficult to see where displaced communities end up at, but out of the 106 households which the study was able to keep track of, only 7.5% remained in the same neighborhood and were able to obtain housing nearby. About a quarter of residents were forced to move out of the city or the state. What signifies poverty to some, will signify profit to others.

The search for a new home can become a struggle for just about anyone. It can be especially daunting for those who are given no choice but to move under a given time frame.

Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, follows the lives of eight

¹⁵ Currier, Erin. “American Families Face a Rent Burden .” Economic Mobility. The Pew Charitable Trusts, April 2018. https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2018/04/rent-burden_report_v2.pdf.

¹⁶ Julie Mah (2020): Gentrification-Induced Displacement in Detroit, Michigan: An Analysis of Evictions, Housing Policy Debate, DOI: 10.1080/10511482.2020.1800781

¹⁷ Ibid.

different families from Milwaukee who are undergoing eviction, and examines the role that local rental markets have on vulnerable low-income families. Desmond finds that in Milwaukee, a city of about 105,000 renter households, about 16,000 evictions occur every year and 16 eviction cases daily.¹⁸ Eviction continues to be a problem even today. Because poor renting families already spend more than half of their income on housing, subtle changes in one's employment or environmental circumstances can drastically alter someone's status as a renter. Among the eight stories Desmond introduces, is Arleen Belle, a Black mother of two. She is facing a forced eviction and finds herself at a homeless shelter. After a few weeks of being able to rent a four-bedroom house which she struggled to obtain, she once again struggles to find stable housing when the city claims the property is unfit for being a housing complex. She then moves into a deteriorating apartment that is extremely filthy and falling apart -- a wooden plank acts as the door's lock. She doesn't remain in this new location for long either. Most of her life is described by unstable housing.

Desmond then highlights Sherrena, a Black former teacher and current landowner who owned some properties in the North Side of Milwaukee. She owned a burned-out duplex in the back of Wright Street, and used the insurance money to buy two more duplexes. Sherren became a landlord in an inner city community after learning she could rent her properties at the same rates as similar properties in higher-class neighborhoods, because the tenants were so poor and desperate to the point they would take any home, even if they were ill-maintained. So when the nicer neighborhoods rejected those with criminal records or former evictions, the tenants had no choice but to rent with Sherren. On the surface, one can argue that Sherrena is simply pursuing

¹⁸ Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Broadway Books, 2017.

the American Dream, trying to make a living. However, the more we learn about her, the more we find out about her lack of compassion. She had one goal and one goal only: get as much money as once can possibly get from tenants and employees, even if it means taking the last cent they have. Tenants are much more than just a means to money. They are real people living real lives.

The lack of affordable housing is one of the primary causes of poverty and an urgent issue to address. Throughout the book, the accumulation of wealth and the right to a safe and stable home became the two contested arguments. For Desmond however, dealing with the economic and psychological suffering that gets inflicted on the poor as a result of becoming evicted, far outweighs the need to make money for a landlord seeking profit out of someone's state as a homelessness. He argues that what the "in-the-process" eviction families endure is not just wrong, but completely goes against the values we collectively hold as Americans.

It is clear that eviction already exists as a problem in various struggling cities, and is one that gentrification can exacerbate, especially in marginalized city neighborhoods where the eviction rates are already high. When areas become vacant, landlords have the flexibility to increase rents, making it even less accessible for the already existing low-income families. When gentrification occurs in a previously disinvested neighborhood, it does not just impact the displacement and eviction filing rates in one neighborhood, but rather spills over to neighboring tracts who are preparing for the rapid migration of middle and upper class individuals.¹⁹

¹⁹ Laniyonu, Ayobami. "Assessing the Impact of Gentrification on Eviction: A Spatial Modeling Approach." Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review, 2019.
<https://harvardcrcl.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2019/07/54.2-Laniyonu.pdf>.
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3 Erasure of Culture

Urban development projects can bring about some improvements to a historically disinvested community by bringing new people and money into the city, but in doing, such projects kill some of the cultural traditions and diversity that make those cities so dynamic and desirable in the first place.

Harlem: Shift in Black Identity-Culture

Harlem, located in the northern part of New York City, was once recognized as an international symbol of Black culture. Between World War I and the 1930s, thousands of African Americans who had made their way into New York during the Great Migration in search of a better standard of living, turned Harlem into the neighborhood with the largest concentration of Black people in the world. From unskilled laborers, to artists, to educated middle-classes, Harlem became the main destination for African Americans of all backgrounds seeking autonomy and a commitment to forming a new identity as free people. This cultural explosion of Black celebration through art expression became known as the Harlem Renaissance — a time period marked by the spread of Black poetry, art, jazz, and dance. At its peak, Harlem had become the epicenter of American culture. But by the Great Depression, several African-American owned businesses suffered immensely.

By 1970, Harlem now represented Manhattan's largest concentration of working-class residents.²⁰

*Table 1: Demographics of Central Harlem (NY) *Smith 1996**

	<i>Central Harlem</i>	<i>Manhattan</i>
Percentage population black	96.1	21.7
Per capita income (\$)	4,308	10,992
Percentage high-income households (\$50,000+)	0.5	8.4
Percentage low-income households (less than \$10,000)	65.5	37.4
Percentage college graduates (adults with 4+ years of college)	5.2	33.2
Median contract rent (\$ per month)	149	198
Percentage managerial, professional, and related occupations	15.9	41.7
Private property turnover rate per year (1980–1983) (%)	3.3	5.0
Population change, 1970–80 (%)	–33.6	–7.2
Percentage housing abandoned	24.2	5.3

Sources: US Department of Commerce 1972, 1983; City of New York, Department of City Planning 1981; Real Estate Board of New York 1985

Over half of the population in Central Harlem made less than \$10,000 a year, and would be subjected to a decline in its population. With the onset of the national recession, Harlem faced a decline in housing prices. The most prominent investment in Harlem became a 599-unit condominium project that was sponsored by the New York City Housing Partnership. In the summer of 1985, the city received a \$6million subsidized grant along with a bank loan of \$47million to finance the construction of the production, which completely changed the financial composition of Central Harlem.²¹ Seventy percent of the apartments units were purchased by

²⁰ Schaffer, Richard, and Neil Smith. "The Gentrification of Harlem?" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 76, no. 3 (1986): 347-65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2562585>.

²¹ Ibid.

middle-income residents, while ten percent were purchased by higher-class families. The “cheaper” condominiums were still far too expensive for the average working-class Harlem residents who made far below the required minimum of \$20,000 to enter the bid, leaving them out of one of the largest economic investments in all of Harlem’s history. As property markets skyrocketed, Harlem slowly shifted from a Black-defined geographical space, to an area that housed a majority of white middle-class residents. Homeowners began being interested in Harlem for its newer housing renovations, rather than for its previous burst in Black-identity culture.

Harlem went from having an initial population of 237,467 in 1950 — 98% of which were Black residents — to a starking population of 101,026 by 1990.²² When a community’s demographics change, so does its culture.

Prior to 1970, Harlem with its high population of Black residents, had several “soul-food” restaurants. With a now decreasing Black demographic, Harlem’s new resident preferred other types of restaurant alternatives that hadn’t initially been introduced to the community. On the surface, alternative dietary preferences are no problem. However, when people move into a community that was once so rich in a given culture, pushing for different styles of tastes that gears to your own liking, becomes more complex. The popularity of Soul food in communities surrounding Harlem, such as Atlanta, Queens, or New York, is not declining. Instead, the closing of Harlem traditional home-based restaurants is a result of an

²² Recoquillon, Charlotte. “Neoliberalization and Spatial (In)Justice: The Gentrification of Harlem.” *Justice Spatiale - Spatial Justice*. French Institute De Géopolitique, June 2014. <https://www.jssj.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Recoquillon-Eng-n°6-jssj.pdf>.

influx of wealthy, none-Harlem natives who are forcing soul foods' traditional customers to leave the neighborhood and find another community that is geared towards them.

A lot of the frustration that comes with gentrification, is the ability of mobility — a lot of the more affluent residents feel like the new incoming people are colonizing the neighborhood with hipster aesthetics, as opposed to wanting to be a part of the neighborhood. When you gentrify a neighborhood that has a history of identity-based art and empowerment, and replace it with trendy, overpriced coffee shops, you get rid of a culture and the stories associated with that place. Coming in and replacing a mom and pop shop with a new pricey coffee shop like Starbucks, that is obviously not geared towards the Black and Brown residents living there, residents are bound to feel disempowered.

The hair salons and buffet-style soul food restaurants that once made up Harlem's Black lifestyle, had turned into a commercial hub with over 2,000 new market-rate condominiums, hipster coffee shops, and nightclubs that didn't play music that catered to the previous culture of Black Harlem. When a community turns into a commercial state by wealthy outside investors that know nothing about the history behind the neighborhoods they are investing in, you strip it completely of its identity. Harlem had become extremely susceptible to gentrification due to its close proximity to other higher rent cities like upper-East side Manhattan. But what may seem to be a commercial success, really signifies a cultural disaster. Cultural changes don't happen overnight, but they also never stop once a community undergoes gentrification.

Good White People: A Short Film About Gentrification perfectly demonstrates this loss of culture that comes with most urban development plans. The fifteen minute film documents the lives of several long-time Black residents in an inner-city Cincinnati neighborhood, as they're being forced to move out after their building gets bought by the city and being replaced with fancy restaurants and luxury apartments. The film introduces a local family business that is owned by a father of three, who simultaneously happens to be the karate teacher for the kids on the block. He and his family have little over a month to move out. Despite being a karate instructor for over 10 years, his life is now being faced with a big change that is proving to be a burden much more than an improvement:

You come home one day and you open an envelope up and it just says 'you have 45 days. We're sorry for the inconvenience... and a bunch of this other stuff' that's it. They want something different, a certain look. And they don't want a mom and pops store. They want to gut the building. And they've already started doing that. They already started a new plan, and we are not in the plan.²³

For a lot of the young Black kids interviewed in the film, yoga and karate groups kept them out of the streets — it offered them a different level of piece of mind. They saw their community as they know it, evolve into a rich and busy life of middle-class white culture. Cincinnati went from having a large group of poor Black kids, to a neighborhood recognized for their richness in white-middle class communities. Completely changing the social dynamics and culture of a community is a common effect of gentrification.

²³ Good White People(film). "GOOD WHITE PEOPLE: A Short Film About Gentrification. *YouTube video*, November 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdUsZaJ80zl>

Battle Over Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

The growth of the “hipster scene” in various cities undergoing gentrification, is rapidly taking over communities that used to be known for their history of art and community pop shops. In large cities undergoing such a change, urban development plans almost serve as a form of rebranding of cultural quarters. To make the redevelopment process more “organic”, developers can persuade artists to move into areas of cities currently undergoing development. What is masked as art appreciation, is really art suppression, especially when the new hipster art is meant to cover up art that has been historical to a community’s culture. This is what locals are now describing as “artwash”, the process by which a company purchases advertising places usually through a gallery, in order to cover up negative images of a community that would keep affluent residents from moving in. Rather than employing artists that understand the culture and history of the neighborhood undergoing the development process, developers look to hire outside artists who will make a neighborhood look like a brand new, aesthetically pleasing community. Artwashing is thus intended as to shy away from old, dirty business and focus instead on a false perception of what a neighborhood is really like.

Defend Boyle Heights and Boyle Heights Alianza Anti-Artwashing y Desplazamiento — two groups in LA committed to fighting gentrification — coined the term artwashing in 2018 after art galleries after they saw an encroachment of high-end art galleries into low-income communities, or “barrios” as referred to by Boyle Heights residents. Defend Boyle Heights defined artwashing as the process in which gentrifiers (private developers and artists) redevelop a neighborhood to make it prettier for new, more affluent residents, and in the process of

beautifying it, erase a big part of a neighborhood's history.²⁴ Boyle Heights, a predominantly Chicana, low-income neighborhood in Los Angeles, is extremely vulnerable to gentrification due to the large increase in abandoned buildings as homelessness levels are on the rise.

It isn't that Boyle Heights want to get "rid of art" altogether, but rather, they don't welcome art that replaces historical murals with images of Brown and Indigenous people to tell a different story. The high-end galleries that get introduced as a result of gentrification, are often owned by white artists where white people profit off of POC art. In the presence of artwashing, artists — who are usually white or simply not previously from the neighborhood undergoing development — get commissioned to recreate the art that is representative of the neighborhood. Rather than seeking native residents from a neighborhood, developers in Boyle heights and other growing cities reach out to outsiders for art commissions, and thus providing a new narrative on the culture of the working-class community of a neighborhood.

'Progressive' artists imagine themselves to be separate from this system, and mistake things like 'diversity' and 'inclusion' for substantive, material concessions, including the forfeiture of accessing certain spaces, as well as opportunities and positions of artistic or intellectual authority. This confusion of 'progress' with actual redistribution of wealth and freedom for self-determination is similar to the compromises politicians make in search of liberal solutions that offer no moral or material challenge to the violence, racism, and misogyny of the status quo.²⁵

Essential to understanding the artwashing of places like Boyle Heights, requires examining three different exhibition buildings that anti-gentrification groups have strongly identified as artwashing in the heart of Boyle Heights: 356 Mission, Nicodim Gallery, and Weird

²⁴ Boyle Heights Alianza Anti Artwashing y Desplazamiento. N.d.
<http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/coalition-statements/bhaaad-the-short-history-of-a-long-struggle/>.

²⁵ Ibid

Wave Coffee. 365 Mission emerged as a new galley in LA in 2016 that presented itself as a space for art, performance, and community activities in Los Angeles”.²⁶ Owned by Laura Owens and Wendy Yao, in collaboration with New York artist Gavin Brown, the art mission hosted hundreds of events and over 50 exhibitions. The building itself looked old, almost hiding its appearance as an art exhibit — that is, until a wealthy, hipster resident started to come to Boyle Heights to see the exhibitions, and staying longer than expected. In 2018, 356 Mission left Boyle Heights, as protesters urged them to leave. While 356 Mission had a plain appearance, Nicodim Gallery — located on the corner of Anderson Street and East 6th Street —publicly identifies itself as an art gallery with its buildings bright orange colors.

In 2019, as art exhibits in Boyle Heights began attracting more middle-class residents, Nicodim Gallery became a victim of its own venom. With increasing renting prices, Nicodim Gallery was forced to move to a new downtown location because they could no longer afford increasing rent prices. While this may seem a victory for Boyle Heights residents for pushing another non-native Art gallery out for their community, this is bad news for the next low-income community Nicodim Gallery chooses to move into. The new location is yet to be determined, although they are planning to move closer to the heart of Los Angeles in search of cheaper vacant buildings.

Then there is Weird Wave Coffee, the new business on the busy commercial center of Boyle Heights in Cesar E. Chavez Avenue, that replaces murals of Brown pride. In this case,

²⁶ “Must Reads: The Art Gallery Exodus from Boyle Heights and Why More Anti-Gentrification Battles Loom on the Horizon.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, August 9, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-gentrification-protests-future-of-boyle-heigths-20180808-story.html>.

although Weird Wave Coffee was *not* an art exhibit but rather a shop that *still* managed to replace walls of art that had previously existed in its location, anti-gentrification groups deem it to qualify it as artwashing because it stands as an establishes whose purpose is to beautify the neighborhood and incentivize more reinvestment initiative by developers. Weird Wave Coffee, which most residents claim to be a knock off of Starbucks, is one of several businesses Boyle Height residents argue continues to *white-wash* long-held Mexican-American neighborhoods that only fulfills a need for hipsters who prefer new coffee shops over pop shops. Although just a coffee shop on its surface, Boyle Heights locals argue this is the first step in turning Boyle Heights into the next Highland Park or Silverlake, where rent prices are high and every-day-life is characterized by new commercialized shops.

Gentrification and “improvement” methods don’t cater to the pre-existing communities but rather favors the interests and aesthetics of the middle class. The more prevalent these changes become, the more low-income, long-term residents feel silenced and disempowered. As such, *barrio* residents continue to organize and mobilize themselves to fight gentrification at any phase. In November 2016, the Los Angeles Police Department had been called after Chicana protesters in Boyle Heights sprayed “Fuck White Art” over the Nicodim Gallery storefront. Because the element of the message included a mention of race, charges went from vandalism to being recognized as a hate crime — the store owner dropped the charges after continuous backlash from anti-gentrifier prior to the incident.

The revitalization strategy that developers choose to adopt when initiating the redevelopment of a previously disinvested community, matters a lot and can change the outcomes of how it gets perceived by locals. Considering the political and historical contexts of

Boyle Heights, Harlem, and other cities where the population of marginalized communities is high, bringing in high-end galleries, expensive coffee shops, and multifaceted complexes, will not be received well, especially when they replace murals and art that tell the history of a given neighborhood.

Development Not Displacement

In 2017 YouTube channel Jubilee brought different transplant entrepreneurs --- those in favor of gentrification --- to debate with locals from Southern California who opposed gentrification, to see if both viewpoints could find common ground. As it turned out, not much of a “common ground” was achieved. Instead, the video served to demonstrate the stark differences in how transplants and locals view urban development.²⁷ Female transplant Dominique, argued that gentrification was not a war on poor people but rather a need “for LA to be developed” and reinvigorated — a change that she claims would help create new jobs. To this, locals responded by questioning the type of demographics that actually benefit from the emergence of job occupations in given areas, as it is rarely people who have lived there for years. One local identified herself as a resident from Crenshaw, a low-income hometown that predominantly served poor Black and Brown communities. She expressed concerns about a new city proposal that aims to turn Crenshaw mall into a Grove 2.0. The Grove, unlike Crenshaw Mall, is located in Beverly Grove — a rich community where the median household income is at about \$147,270 and whose demographics are largely composed of white people.²⁸ Crenshaw on the other hand, only has a median household income of \$46,000 and is composed of a 53% Black, 31% Hispanic community.

²⁷ “[Jubilee]. (2017, November 7). Can Locals and Transplants See Eye To Eye on Gentrification? [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIGXgWifPyl>

²⁸ “Census Profile: 90210.” Census Reporter, 2019.
<https://censusreporter.org/profiles/86000US90210-90210/>.

It is More Than Just Shops

Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza is a shopping mall located in Los Angeles, California and owned by the Capri Capital Partners Group. The mall was in Crenshaw District, a major economic and cultural hub of the African American community. Fast forward to 2018, and Los Angeles was dealing with a new construction proposal that was said to rejuvenate Crenshaw. The construction intended not to renovate the mall with additional stores, but rather turn Crenshaw Plaza into a mixed-use complex that called for 961 new condos and apartments, a 400-room hotel, new restaurants, and a luxury retail space --- all priced at a level that community members could not afford.²⁹ In order to afford a new market-rate housing unit, a household would have to make around \$104,000 a year. That is a value that is twice the median household incomes of Leimert Park and four times the median household income in Baldwin Village. At that time, the census report documented Leimert Park having a median income of \$36,010 while Baldwin Village had a median income of \$19,932. Leimert Park and Baldwin Village are the two main communities surrounding Crenshaw Plaza.³⁰ As is the reality in several urban development projects, renovations in poor areas fail to sustain the affordability of renting and homeownership for the majority of long-term residents with a minimum living wage.

Shortly after the Los Angeles City Council announced its support for the \$700 million redevelopment plan of Crenshaw, seven community groups were quick to express their outrage for the initiative, arguing that it would displace long-term Black residents. The seven groups included: the Crenshaw Subway Coalition, the Los Angeles Tenants Union, the Los Angeles

²⁹ Barragan, Bianca. 2018. "Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza Redevelopment wins City Council approval." Curbed Los Angeles.

<https://la.curbed.com/2018/6/28/17442638/baldwin-hills-crenshaw-plaza-redevelopment-approval>.

³⁰ "Census Tract 2343, Los Angeles." n.d. Census Reporter.

<https://censusreporter.org/profiles/14000US06037234300-census-tract-2343-los-angeles-ca/>.

Black Worker Center, and the Black Community Clergy and Labor Alliance. Damien Goodmon, executive director of Crenshaw Subway Coalition voiced his concerns for the new development plan, claiming it was not a “mall development” but rather a “housing development” intended to change the cultural dynamic and the economic influx of Crenshaw residents. Although the initial purpose of Crenshaw Subway Coalition was to amend Metro projects to better address Angelino concerns, it has recentred their attention to focus on city development initiatives. They urged the community to halt the city purchase of Crenshaw Mall, as the development project would serve as an attack on the security of Black families, local pop shops, and the preservation of Black art and political power.³¹ Under the agreement, Capri was required to set aside 10% of the condos for low-income households. The development agreement also said that 30% of the project’s construction team would have to be hired locally. However, Crenshaw locals argued that anything below a 50% local hire agreement was not sufficient, since several Crenshaw residents would be displaced as a result of his project anyways once it got finalized.

In response, a group known as Downtown Crenshaw publicized a petition to stop the sale of Crenshaw to develop CIM, and garnered over 10,000 signatures from local residents. After much community outrage, in June of 2020 CIM withdrew from purchasing the Plaza claiming that the community and mall would best be served if they stepped away. Although this was a small win, the desire to fight displacement remains alive.

Growth is not the problem, inequity is. The Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) — a national network of government citizens working towards racial

³¹ “Capri’s Crenshaw Mall Redevelopment: “Urban Cleansing” by Another Name.” 2017. Crenshaw Subway Coalition. https://www.crenshawsubway.org/crenshaw_mall.

and equitable policies for all— define equitable development as “quality of life outcomes, such as affordable housing, quality education, living wage employment, healthy environments, and transportation [that] are equitably experienced by the people currently living and working in the neighborhood, as well as for new people moving in.”³² Public and private investments rarely meet the needs of the existing residents at the same time that it benefits affluent incoming residents, and that is where the issue lies.

Changes and improvements *are* necessary to help improve “revive” a community that was experiencing high levels of disinvestments, but those changes *must* meet the needs of those living in those states of poverty in order for development to not lead to the displacement of long-term poor residents. Low-income communities want to grow too but they’re often left behind.

The concept of improving communities through investments is not the issue. Purposefully leaving out struggling communities out of those development plans is. For some Harlem residents, private investments can signify change and progress in neighborhoods that have been neglected for a long period of time.

Unfortunately for Harlem, the historic capital of African American culture, the process of progress appears to be erasing a long history of rich black culture and community. When money coming into disadvantaged communities is spent only on commercial developments but not on

³² Curren, R., Liu, N., & Marsh, D. (2015, September). *Equitable Development as a Tool to Advance Racial Equity*. Racial Equity Alliance. <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GARE-Equitable-Development.pdf>

school improvements or on building more affordable housing, city planning private developers leave several low-income residents feeling disempowered and angry.

Displacement disrupts access to education, employment, healthcare, and healthy neighborhood amenities. Residents forced to move may face longer commutes to work or school, leading to increased stress, loss of income, job loss or greater school dropout rate. Displaced residents may have trouble obtaining medical records, prescriptions, and affordable health care services.

Displacement can also mean relocation to neighborhoods with fewer health-promotion resources, such as high quality jobs, healthy food options, accessible to public transit, and safe and walkable streets.³³

These are *real* people. *Real* stories. *Real* lives that are being forced to leave their home in the name of development, while someone who has been foreign to the history of a given place, chooses to move in and completely change the social dynamics of a neighborhood. The identity and culture of a neighborhood is not the only thing that changes under gentrification, but someone's whole livelihood as they know it.

Community-based Alternatives

An efficient approach to improving a community's revitalization, involves moving away from a capital-growth perspective of cities, to a much more community-oriented one. Let's start with federal policies. Enacting policies that keep land from easily being subjected to market forces by either implementing housing projects where the governments own the land, or by

³³ Levitt, Zoë. "Gentrification Is Making Us Sick: Envisioning Healthy Development without Displacement." *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 20, no. 1 (2015): 87-93 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43875796>.

having more rent-price control regulations is a great start.³⁴ Initiatives like Section 8 Housing vouchers for instance, help low-income tenants pay a portion of their income for rent if they fall under a given income bracket. Section 8 housing projects ensure that struggling to survive, still have a home to call their own. Rent gaps in cities need to be small enough to not make gentrification profitable. Funding housing projects for youth at risk of homelessness, is also another avenue that could help occupy urban spaces for people from all income-brackets and not just middle classes. To do that, the governments would need to take a proactive, community-based approach to development and move away from a capitalist perception of urban spaces.

Place-based investments --- investments that change a neighborhood's climate and social dynamic without displacing its residents --- help improve communities in such a way that does not make struggling families move in order to survive. Investments that replace abandoned buildings for libraries, schools, community gardens, or even health centers instead of luxury apartments, bring several needed resources into poor communities that might otherwise not be there. For children growing up in poor neighborhoods, their life is often associated with a reduced educational attainment and lowered adult earnings. As adults, their experiences are associated with worse health conditions and reduced happiness.³⁵ Neighborhood poverty is an important factor contributing to intergenerational poverty. Thus, investments in public schools in inner-city communities can help equalize access to various economic and social services that kids in wealthier neighborhoods grew up having. Schools as social institutions can build civic

³⁴ Moskowitz, Peter. *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood*. New York: Nation Books, 2018.

³⁵ Quillian, Lincoln. "Neighborhood and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty." The Institute for Research on Poverty, 2017. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc332e.pdf>. Focus Vol. 33, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2017

participation, and can teach children and young adults how to be contributing members of society.³⁶ By improving school practices through increased funding and other interventions, the socioeconomic achievement gaps can be narrowed. In *Evicted*, Desmond argued that providing stable housing and lowering evictions was a human capital investment that was like an investment in education; it is not only essential, but also holds the potential to decrease poverty and homelessness in neighborhoods if made smartly. Although his solution to decreasing evictions involved more affordable housing, as we have seen, gentrification is a much more complicated phenomenon that is rooted in the desire to generate capital. It is not enough to simply give everyone the opportunity to have a stable home, they must be willing to stay.

If we are serious about change, moving away from profit-based forms of urbanization, and instead towards sustainable forms of urbanism can help lessen the inequalities that a lot of low-income families encounter under gentrification. Planning for equity requires making investments that don't outwardly displace long-term residents and simply replace them with more affluent ones. While low-income residents show interest in wanting their neighborhoods to be cleaner and safer, they do not want their neighborhoods to turn flashy and trendy.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ -, Rick Jacobus, Rick Jacobus <http://streetleveladvisors.com> Rick Jacobus, and Rick Jacobus. "It's Not Either/Or: Neighborhood Improvement Can Prevent Gentrification." Shelterforce, September 5, 2018. https://shelterforce.org/2013/07/18/its_not_either_or_neighborhood_improvement_can_prevent_gentrification/.

Conclusion

The debate on gentrification at its core is based on the argument of who a neighborhood belongs to: long-term residents who call it their home, or those who have the economic means to invest in it with money. This controversy over who owns the right to a given space, dates back to the origins of capitalism and America's desire to commodify land for the sake of profit.

Capitalism at its most basic foundation, is based on a driving need to extract wealth from any productive activities of society in the form of capital. Under gentrification, housing becomes a productive activity. It is under such a process, that housing becomes an extreme commodity with which different institutions exploit in the name of urban revitalization.

Whether because of adverse economic developments ("post somethings" as Moskowitz puts it) or state policies, the process almost always favors capitalism and the enrichment of private developers over the history and bonds of those in the low-income communities who are displaced. Time after time, working-class communities are left behind in the opportunities for social mobility, despite urban developments projects being disguised as diversity projects intended to revitalize a community as a whole. Communities that have several abandoned buildings being sold at a cheap price, are most vulnerable to the impact of gentrification. Cheap sales of urban spaces makes it easier for developers to implement multifaceted condos, high-end art exhibitions, and coffee shops that cater to a new bourgeoisie group.

With new changes, comes new adjustments. In the prevalence of gentrifications, a community will not only experience an influx of new residents, but will also deal with new rent prices, and a new level of commercialization. While gentrification can in some cases bring about

a form of economic capital, only middle and upper class communities get to enjoy the benefits. Working-class communities very much occupy the “backstage” role when it comes to gentrification. They are left in the shadows and deprived of the economic gain that comes with urban development. When we choose to evict residents in the name of a neighborhood development, we are simply moving homelessness from one area to another. In the presence of higher rents, low-income communities are forced to leave their home in search of a home they can afford. The more residents leave a gentrifying community, the easier it becomes to gentrify.

Gentrification is rarely about helping poor communities, but about satisfying corporate interests, and long-term locals recognize that. So when they see new trendy coffee shops slowly start making their way into their community, it is expected for locals to organize and fight gentrification movements before it becomes too late. Low-income neighborhoods don't fear development, they fear being left behind. So when new businesses start to claim urban spaces that were previously used by marginalized communities, one can expect for the change to not be welcomed. Displacement and not development, is the real enemy.

Safety and stability is a right, not a privilege. Calling for an anti-capitalist model of cities, is the most equitable way to approach urban development initiatives. On the state and federal side, the implementation of rent control and subsidized housing can offer protections for residents living in communities where rent increases are becoming all too familiar. Putting a cap on how much a landlord can charge for rent, helps remove the incentivization landlords have to raise rent in the presence of more affluent tenants. Rent control policies can also ensure that long-term residents living in a given area don't get displaced to the extent that they currently are

in. Place-based investment such as investments that replace abandoned buildings for libraries, schools, community gardens, or even health centers instead of condos, bring developments that hadn't previously existed in a given area, without causing displacements. Initiatives that gives residents the opportunity to have stable housing *and* give them the opportunity to stay, are the most equitable approaches to urban development.

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